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Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Maly, I. (2018). *The global New Right and the Flemish identitarian movement Schild & Vrienden: A case study*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 220).

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Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 220

The global New Right and the Flemish identitarian movement Schild & Vrienden A case study

by

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December 2018



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The global New Right and the Flemish identitarian movement Schild & Vrienden. A case study.

Ico Maly

Abstract:

This paper argues that nationalism, and nationalistic activism in particular are being globalized. At least certain fringes of radical nationalist activists are organized as ‘cellular systems’ connected and mobilize-able on a global scale giving birth to what I call ‘global nationalistic activism’. Given this change in nationalist activism, I claim that we should abandon all ‘methodological nationalism’. Methodological nationalism fails in arriving at a thorough understanding of the impact, scale and mobilization power (Tilly, 1974) of contemporary ‘national(istic)’ political activism. Even more, it inevitably will contribute to the naturalization or in emic terms the meta-political goals of global nationalist activists. The paradox is of course evident: global nationalism uses the scale-advantages, network effects and the benefits of cellular structures to fight for the (re)construction of the old 19th century vertebrate system *par excellence*: the (blood and soil) nation. Nevertheless, this, I will show, is an indisputable empirical reality: the many local nationalistic battles are more and more embedded in globally operating digital infrastructures mobilizing militants from all corners of the world for nationalist causes at home. Nationalist activism in the 21st century, so goes my argument, has important global dimensions which are easily repatriated for national use. This forces us to adjust our understanding of locality, nationalism and our methodological apparatus.

Keywords: Methodological nationalism, discourse, global nationalism, network effects, cellular systems

On 3 March 2018, the young Flemish identitarian movement ‘Schild & Vrienden’ organized an activist intervention to derail ludic protest of civil society organizations at the Gravensteen Castle in Ghent, Belgium. These civil society organizations were protesting the ‘*inhuman European migration policies*’ (Gent Insight, 2018). Schild & Vrienden showed up with 20 à 30 activists. They pulled down the giant European flag hanging on the walls of the castle and filmed their intervention. This video material was then edited into a three-minute clip and uploaded on the Schild & Vrienden Facebook-page. The video immediately went viral. After Facebook banned the movie (because of copyright infringement), Schild & Vrienden re-uploaded it with a different soundtrack on 8 March 2018. At which point it went viral again. Up until today (30 May 2018), the movie managed to attract 92K views, 2.2k interactions, 1,2k shares and 443 comments. These numbers, seen from a Flemish or Belgian perspective, are impressive. They suggest a huge fan-base and subsequently triggered massive mainstream media attention in Flanders (23 articles in the Flemish press) and international attention from right wing outlets like the Gateway Pundit and Red Ice TV. This media coverage in turn boosted the fan – and follower base of Schild & Vrienden’s Facebook-page from around 4000 to over 10.000 likes.

Methodological nationalism and global nationalism

In order to understand this type of nationalistic activist interventions, I will argue, we need to adopt a global perspective. A perspective that focusses on mobility of resources and the layeredness of this sort of local activism. In short, if we truly want to understand identitarian and nationalistic activism in the 21st century, we need to overcome ‘methodological nationalism’. Research on politics and in particular on nationalism, to a large extent, still displays *‘methodological nationalism (...) the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world’* (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). Methodological nationalism not only blurs out the fact, that the world has always been transnational, it especially turns a blind eye to the impact of cellular systems (Appadurai, 2006: 27) in the construction of the contemporary (political) world.

The rise of digitalization and mobility have created a juncture visible in the scale, the intensity and the scope of globalization processes (Appadurai, 1996; Arnaut e.a. 2016). Migration and digital media have not only reshaped our imagination of the world (Appadurai, 1996:3), they also enabled global (cultural) flows. Whereas in non-digital times, the transnational dimension of politics was to a large extent embedded in the networks of national political elites and vertebrate ‘inter-national’ organizations, this has changed in the last decades (Appadurai, 1996: 32; Maly, Blommaert & Ben Yakoub, 2014). Today, digital media function as infrastructures that enable and structure global networked activist movements (Klein 2002, 4; Wolfson, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). The rising importance of global networks, cellular systems and global cultural and political flows emblematic of this latest phase of globalization are largely undertheorized when it comes to nationalist activism.

With this paper, I want to contribute to the literature on nationalism and nationalist activism in the 21st century. I will argue, based on a literature study and a digital ethnographic case study (Varis, 2016; Pink e.a., 2016; Maly, 2018), that digitalization and ‘high globalization’ have given birth to new forms of nationalist activism further complicating the ties between space, place, identity and nationalistic activism. More concretely, I will argue that in the 21st century radical New Right nationalist activism cannot be understood anymore from a national paradigm focusing on vertebrate systems. I will build the argument that political sciences, in trying to overcome methodological nationalism, could benefit from recent ethnographic, discourse analytical and sociolinguistic studies on globalization, language and culture.

Ethnography, nationalism and an updated notion of locality

Most research on the revival of nationalism, radical right and extreme right parties and movements avoids the impact of digitalization (cfe. Wodak, KhosraviNik & Mral, 2013; Kriesi e.a., 2008; Harris, 2016: 243-247) or fails to acknowledge the global dimensions of contemporary nationalist movements and activists (cfe. Hawley, 2016). Nationalism is still, to a large extent, understood in connection to a ‘national community’, the territory of the nation state and the state-institutions (cfe. Hosking, 2016). And even if the impact of digitalization is recognized and the transnational dimensions of contemporary nationalism are highlighted (cfe. Hylland Eriksen, 2007; Bernal, 2014), research is only slowly questioning the nationalist frame. Nowhere, at least to my knowledge, is it highlighted, that nationalist movements in the 21st century are *de facto* turning into global movements.

For some reason, globalization is mostly imagined as a force from the outside: a force that puts pressure on the (nation)-state and as such becomes an *a priori* explanation for the rise of nationalist, radical right and extreme-right parties. Take for example Hosking (2016: 212) who in answering the question why there is a revival of nationalism in Europe, stresses that the nation is 'inherently better' than international systems to uphold trust and organize solidarity. The reason is found in the fact that this particular community is better at absorbing 'symbolic systems'. Nationalism is thus (1) solely imagined within the territory of the nation-state and (2) cultural globalization is completely absent in his analysis. Such arguments, can themselves be read as examples of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1994).

Another emblematic case can be found in the reader '*West European politics in the age of globalization*' (Kriesi e.a., 2008). Even though 'globalization' is at the heart of this reader, the structure of the book itself is a clear example of the focus on vertebrate systems and '*methodological nationalism*'. Each chapter focuses '*on the effects of globalization on national politics*' (Kriesi e.a., 2008: 3) of one (nation-)state. Nationalism and the rise of nationalist politics are thus seen, framed and presented as a reaction to globalization that is supported by sticking up for '*the losers of globalization*'.

These arguments start from a methodological nationalism, and as a result they fail to see that the nation, and nationalist politics and activism have structurally changed in the last decennia.

First of all, globalization is not an outside force anymore, the nation-state in itself is to a large extent globalized as part of '*neoliberal destatisation*' (Swyngedouw, 2005, 1998; Jessop, 2002). After the fall of the Soviet Empire and the triumph of capitalism, states operated under a new sphere of influences. Governmentality was now embedded in a complex network of actors – NGO's, States and supranational institutions like the EU, the World Bank and the IMF. "*Governance as an arrangement of 'governing beyond-the-state'*" was now embedded in '*apparently horizontally organized and polycentric ensembles*' (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1992). The political elites, nations but also parts of the state like national securities apparatuses (Bigo, 2006) were more and more embedded in transnational networks. The (nation-)state lost its monopoly over governance in the last decades (McArthur, -).

Secondly, in the last decades the nation and nationalism became transnational phenomena. The population of the (nation-)state became increasingly 'international', or ethnically and culturally diverse (Vertovec, 2006; Maly, 2014; Arnaut e.a. 2016). This resulted in what Appadurai (2006: 8) calls the '*anxiety of incompleteness*' where '*the presence of (small) numbers of migrants that remind the majorities of the (small) gap which lies between their position as a majority and there the horizon of an unsullied national goal*'. This internationalization of the nation resulted not only in a new revival of nationalism, it also created a '*new nationalism*' claiming to be inclusive and multicultural by focusing on cultural assimilation (Maly, 2012 & 2016) and cultural chauvinism.

Thirdly, we see that the internet and the rise in mobility caused a deterritorialization of the nation. National(ist) citizens living abroad or 'stateless' people were still fighting or at least

dreaming about their own nation. Digital media facilitated this process of ‘transnationalization’ of the nation and nationalism (Hylland Eriksen, 2007; Bernal, 2014).

Nationalism and the nation have fundamentally changed in the last decades. It would therefore be strange to assume that nationalistic activism has not changed under influence of digital media and (cultural) globalization. There is now a booming and a rich literature on the impact of digitalization on political activism (see for example Klein, 2000; Tufekci, 2017, Wolfson, 2014, Roberts, 2013). In the period of high globalization, local activism against neo-liberalization became more and more embedded in transnational networks. The anti-globalization movement is a classic example, but the revolutions in the Middle East and even Al Qaeda and ISIS all had a global dimension (Tufekci, 2017). In all these political movements, we see that certain elements or cells operated only locally, but others operated on a truly global scale. In the timeframe of renewed nationalism and resistance against globalization, we witnessed the creation of transnational cellular systems of resistance. Some of these networks proved to be very stable over long periods of time (see for example Tufekci, 2017). It is remarkable, that this evolution in activism has not yet been researched in the context of nationalist activism.

Many political scientists, scholars and journalists writing on nationalism, still tend to focus on vertebrate systems like the ‘state’ and supra-state structures like the EU, the VN or NATO to explain the rise of nationalism at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. By focusing on these structures, they inevitably reproduce the nation as the basic ‘political unit’ and fail to see the importance of cellular systems (Appadurai, 2006). Even Hylland Eriksen who rightly stresses that *‘in a ‘global era’ of movement and deterritorialisation, the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities’* (Hylland Eriksen, 2007: 1) fails to step out of the nationalist framework. Only people who are national citizens are envisioned as potential carriers of its nationalism. So even in our understanding of transnational nationalism, the nationalist paradigm is dominant.

To adequately overcome this, I propose an ethnographic and discourse oriented approach, focusing on *‘a close examination of small details’* (Bernal, 2014: 6). Such detailed focus on online activities of specific activist groups in specific contexts proves to be fruitful in updating our understanding of the impact of digitalization on nationalism. A lot of the contemporary work on globalization and digitalization from an anthropological, ethnographic, culture studies and sociolinguistics of globalization perspective is very insightful and can help to re-theorize nationalistic activism in times of digitalization and globalization (See Appadurai, 1996 & 2006; Blommaert, 2005, 2011 & 2018; Arnaut e.a. 2016; Maly, 2018a; Wang, 2018).

Within this field, it is now more and more common to accept that digitalization and ‘high globalization’ have profoundly reshaped the world we live in. Despite a lot of vulgar literature and right-wing theories about globalization (see for example Barbar, 2002 or De Benoist, 2017), globalization did not turn the world into a village. Nor do we witness the creation of a global cosmopolitan world culture or Americanization that is destroying local (national) cultures. Globalization, as a cultural phenomenon, can be captured more precisely in terms of cultural flows embedded in scapes (Appadurai, 1996). Local practices or resources are not only globalized, but in turn they also *‘tend to become indigenized in one or another way’* (Appadurai, 1996: 32).

Topics like de-territorialization, transcultural flows and migration have become prominent topics and concepts in all kinds of fields within social sciences. But Blommaert argues compellingly that the mainstreaming of these theories and concepts did not change the dominant syntopy of many social sciences dedicated to globalization processes and migration. The established paradigm still focusses '*on movement in a horizontal and stable place in a chronological time*' (Blommaert, 2011: 5). Blommaert stresses (2011:4) that high or neoliberal globalization forces us to think about the reorganization of Time and Space. This is especially relevant for research on nationalism where most research tends to describe 'reality' from a 'local' and national perspective. A space where things seem fixed in space and time. More concrete: the common assumption in the field seems to be that nationalistic activists are local activists active in local/national movements, organizations and political parties. And if the transnational dimensions of nationalism are analyzed, they still are still analyzed from a 'national', stable and fixed place.

This perspective on 'reality' has blind spots, as it fails to consider how the global is present in the local and vice versa. In the remainder of the paper I will,

- (1) take up Blommaert's argument to analyze the activism of the Flemish identitarian movement Schild & Vrienden. With him I will argue that we need to take 'mobility' or 'motion' of resources as the starting point. This means that I will focus on how various spatiotemporal frames or scales interact with each other. This begs for an improved notion of 'locality'. Local action, I will argue, is better understood as a potentially layered and transnational construct that puts together resources from different scales and thus different spatiotemporal frames together. In order to analyze that layeredness of local action, close attention to the context, to the history, the conditions of production, the uptake and the mobility of resources is of crucial importance. By focusing on this mobility of resources, and adopting a (digital) ethnographic (Varis, 2016), discourse-oriented sociolinguistic approach I will try to overcome methodological nationalism.
- (2) not only take up Appadurai's notion that in the latest phase of globalization, cellular systems have an important place, I will extend it and argue that nationalism, and thus the discursive battle for the nation (Maly, 2014), for the vertebrate system *par excellence*, is now also supported by cellular activism operating on global scale. This activism is embedded in digital infrastructures. This material dimension is important, and I will give it a central place in trying to understand global nationalist activism. Localness in global nationalist activism will be understood as creativity deployed in relation to specific larger-scale 'infrastructural' conditions. Arnaut, Karrebaek & Spotti (2017) use the image of 'poiesis-infrastructure nexus' to capture this dialectic relation. Central in that image is that local creativity (poiesis) is deployed in relation to 'infrastructural' conditions that provide norms, formats and (ideological) constraints. These infrastructures can be found offline, but also online.

If we adopt this perspective on locality, global cultural flows, and the 'poiesis-infrastructure nexus' the seemingly local action of Schild & Vrienden becomes far more complex. We do not just see a Flemish movement of Flemish boys fighting for a Flemish nation with closed borders.

From the moment, we look at locality and local action as a site where stuff from different scales comes together, we are immediately confronted with the complexity of explaining this type of activism, and the impossibility of explaining it without acknowledging its global dimensions.

Global dimensions of Schild & Vrienden

The activism format that Schild & Vrienden adopts during its intervention at the Gravensteen is a good starting point. This '*repertoire of collective action*' (Tilly, 1974: 143-171) – spectacular but albeit small, local, offline but afterwards heavily mediated activism on social media– is not new and can certainly not to be understood as a 'Flemish' practice. It is an excellent example of a *synchronized* phenomenon. Schild & Vrienden uses the same activism formats as the pan-European Identitarian activist movement Generation Identity. The different national and local identitarian movements are specialized in setting up such highly mediatized small-scale actions. This repertoire of collective action was first appropriated by the original French movement *Generation Identitaire* from organizations like GreenPeace to serve their nationalist cause. By now, we see it being used by New Right Identitarian movements all over Europe (Maly, 2018). And in the VS the Alt-Right is also looking at these Identitarian tactics as examples to renew their movement and especially to take it offline (Spencer, 2017b).

Not only the activism format is translocal, the discourse that Schild & Vrienden uses in the Facebook Video is a truly global product. Take for example how Schild & Vrienden frames the video in the accompanying Facebook-status:

'The Flemish Youth fights for its heritage and future. PS: The leftist tears are more visible in HD!' (my translation from Dutch).

The linguistic resources that are deployed here refer to different spatiotemporal frames. The first sentence clearly positions Schild & Vrienden as a Flemish movement fighting for a Flemish future and trying to protect its Flemish heritage. But there is more. They use a populist, or more concretely a '*generational populist format*' (Maly, 2018): they speak in name of the '*Flemish Youth*'. That is also the dominant communicative frame in the Facebook video: Schild & Vrienden is positioned by its leader Dries Van Langenhove as the representatives of the Flemish youth, and that Flemish youth seemingly hates 'the leftists'.

This frame indexes the discursive influence of *Generation Identitaire*. From the start, this Identitarian movement clearly positioned itself as a generational movement, fighting against the 'babyboomer'-generation or the '*soixantehuitards*' who advocate multiculturalism and open borders' (Generation Identity, 2013; Willinger, 2013). This discourse is consistently being reproduced by Dries Van Langenhove. In an interview with the Flemish mainstream newspaper De Morgen, he for instance says:

"The left-wing elite of May 68 has had its say for way too long. (...) it is time for a new counter-culture. Schild & Vrienden wants to be the avant-garde of this." (De Ceulaer, 2018 (my translation)).

Also in the Facebook video, Dries Van Langenhove claims to speak in name of the Flemish youth. This Flemish youth is clearly constructed in distinction to the '*the leftists*' who are

imagined as to be from another generation. He for instance claimed that the *'leftists were all 40, 50 or 60 years old. People who still believe in a dream that we should become a multicultural society with completely open borders'* (Schild & Vrienden, 2018). The importance of this discursive frame is illustrated by the fact, that most 'leftists' present at the Gravensteen Castle were in their twenties and thirties and brought their children along. Reality had to be reframed to fit the Identitarian discourse.

If we zoom out, we see that New Right activists around the world have adopted this discursive frame and position themselves as the voice of their generation. They all claim that they are just like the students in the sixties. And all of them, from the kekistani in the US (Maly, 2018c), De Lavendelkinderen in the Netherlands until the Identitarian activists of Generation Identity operating in the different European countries, frame themselves as the avant-garde of this youth counter-culture (cfe. Dols de Jong, 2018; Rusman, 2018). 'The youth', so goes the narrative, is anti-establishment and the establishment is dominated by baby boomers or in other terms cultural Marxists. This frame is a first truly global dimension of contemporary local nationalist activism.

If we now zoom in on the second part of the status update, we see a reference to a different spatiotemporal frame. The concept of *'leftists tears'* in the status-update is an index of the influence of the alt-right movement in the VS. In the US, Alt-Right activists and 4channers predominantly use the concept *'liberal tears'* to make fun of the 'liberals' and the 'lefties' who are portrayed as *'snowflakes'* (Sergeant, 2017).



" and then Sum.! Real News "

()/'

Countless memes are produced and distributed reproducing this idea (see image 1). Through digital media, these memes travel across borders and become global. New Rights activists around the world encounter these memes and adapt them for local purposes: they get deglobalized or *indigenized*. Liberal tears, in a Flemish context, would not really work as 'liberals' in Flanders are commonly understood as a (center)-right party. 'Leftist tears' is thus an example of how globalization actually works: as processes of englobalization and deglobalization. This adaptation not only shows how digital media enable the mobility of

resources, it also is an index of the global dimension of local action. It shows how local activism is creatively produced in interaction with recourses circulating through digital infrastructures.

Metapolitics, locality and synchrony

The Alt-Right, as a result of the electoral victory of Donald Trump has become an important center in producing discursive materials to further a New Right agenda on a global scale (Maly, 2018). This discursive ‘reference’ to the Alt-Right in the status-update of Schild & Vrienden is not a coincidence. It is an index of the systematic global nature of this type of nationalist activism, and the rising influence of the Alt-Right in this niche. This influence is also visible in the adoption of the meme as a metapolitical instrument.

Metapolitics is a key word within New Right movement worldwide and refers to the long-term strategy of GRECE (*Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation Européenne*), better known as *La Nouvelle Droite*, the school of thought of Alain De Benoist, Guillaume De Faye and Dominique Venner founded in 1968 (Maly, 2018b). Metapolitics was the heart of the GRECE project, it starts from ‘*the primacy of culture over politics as the premise to a revolution in the spirit of ‘right-wing Gramscism’*’ (Griffin, 2000). This was more than just a strategy, it was also what was used to position this ‘school of thought’ as ‘new’ and thus seemingly different from the ‘old right’¹. *Nouvelle Droite* intellectuals like Alain De Benoist openly quoted leftist sources and positioned themselves as ‘*ni droite, ni gauche*’. Metapolitics gave them an aura of intellectualism and moderation, despite the very radical anti-Enlightenment nature of their project (Maly, 2018; Zienkowski, in review).

The theories, concepts, ideas and the intellectuals that *La Nouvelle droite* has promoted, give coherence to the New Right movements worldwide. This coherence is also visible in the types of infrastructures these movements set up. What is known today as the Alt-Right in the US, gradually came into existence as a polycentric network embedded in all kinds of digital media (Counter Currents, Vdare, Taki Magazine, American Renaissance), think tanks (National Policy Institute), congresses and fora (Maly, 2018). All these online and offline infrastructures were set up as ‘*metapolitical instruments*’ and resemble the type of organizations New Right movements set up all over Europe (cfe. Salzborn, 2016; Griffin, 2000).

¹ The adoption of concepts like New Right or Alt-Right in this paper should not be understood as normative: I do not in any way express agreement with the claim that New Right activists make, namely that there is a substantial or an epistemological difference between the ‘new’ and the so-called ‘old right’. On the contrary, I define the New Right as the post-WWII re-articulation of the two-century-old anti-Enlightenment tradition (Sternhell, 2010; Maly, 2018a & 2018). Several scholars like Bar-on (2012 & 2016), Salzborn (2016), Maly (2018a & 2018b), Zienkowski (in review) point out that the New Right not only draws upon the ideas of the conservative revolution (organic nationalism, ...), but actually attacks Enlightenment ideas as representative democracy, equality, universal human rights or feminism (see for example De Benoist & Champetier, 2000).

John Morgan (editor of the radical right publishing house Arktos) first and for most as “a culture primarily of blogs, memes, podcasts, and videos” which he claims is the “natural outgrowth of the anti-intellectualism inherent in Anglo-American political and cultural discourse (...)” (Morgan, 2017).

One of the most successful metapolitical instruments of the Alt-Right was the appropriation of the meme and the embeddedness of the metapolitical battle in the ongoing culture war between 4channers and the normies after Gamergate (Nagle, 2017: 24). This memification of the metapolitical battle for the ideals of the conservative revolution caused a global renewal of the metapolitical battle. This very specific repertoire of collective action – deeply embedded in the contemporary algorithmically determined public space – was very fast adopted by New Right cells around the world. It was globalized.

The meme, and the Pepe-The-Frog memes (Nagle, 2017) in particular, became successful export products. Pepe-The-Frog not only got englobalized, he was also deglobalized/indigized or repatriated and mobilized for local metapolitical nationalistic battles. Even more, he helped to construct or at least connect different (individual) actors, movements and cells from different corners of the world and thus *de facto* contributed to a more and more networked Global New Right niche. Schild & Vrienden is a clear example of the organizational effects of these complex cultural and political flows. The movement was born online out of the online collaboration of Flemish nationalist students on an online Facebook community called ‘De fiere Vlaamse meme’ (The proud Flemish meme) (Ceder, 2017; Maly, 2018).



The profile pic of that Facebook community (see figure 3- is a good example of this complex notion of locality and the local nationalist action. Pepe-the-frog is mobilized for the Flemish nationalist cause. But whereas Pepe indexes contemporary internet-culture and Alt-Right metapolitics, the words ‘Schild en Vriend’, the Flemish flag and 1302 refer to a very different spatio-temporal frame. They refer, just like the name Schild & Vrienden, to the known and old Flemish nationalist myth about the so-called ‘Brugse metten’ in 1302. In this Flemish nationalist cult, the social conflict dimension is downplayed as to frame it as a first legendary Flemish nationalist battle against the French. In this myth, “Schild & Vriend” was used as a shibboleth to

be able to identify the France enemies (Tollebeek, 1999). By choosing the name Schild & Vrienden the movement clearly positions itself in a very long tradition of Flemish nationalist politics.

Virality, the Global New Right Network and the poiesis-infrastructure nexus

It is undeniable that these activists are Flemish nationalists. Not only do they reproduce classic Flemish nationalist discourses, they stand for an independent Flanders. At the same time, we can only understand their activism as a clear break with traditional Flemish nationalism. The metapolitical agenda of ‘De Fiere Vlaamse meme’ and ‘Schild & vrienden’, their discourse and the activism formats index the global dimensions of this local activism. The dominant use of English alone, would have been completely unthinkable for Flemish nationalists of the previous generations. Their local and blood-and soil nationalistic activism is a layered construct that puts together resources from different scales and spatiotemporal frames.

One detailed look at the Schild & Vrienden webshop underlines this analysis even more. The stickers (figure 3) are sold as ‘metapolitical’ tools for offline activism. The slogans on these stickers can be categorized in three overarching categories pointing again to different spatiotemporal frames:

- (1) Old skool Flemish nationalist slogans (Leuven Vlaams, Schild & Vrienden, linkse ratten rol uw matten) and new skool ironic Flemish nationalist slogans (tis al de schuld van de sossen)
- (2) Pan European identitarian activism (‘Zekere grenzen, zekere toekomst’ refers to the German slogan ‘Sichere Grenzen, sichere zukunft’ from the German Identitäre Bewegung)
- (3) Alt-right and pro-Trump activism (Make Vlaanderen Great Again, It’s okay to be white, White Lives matter)

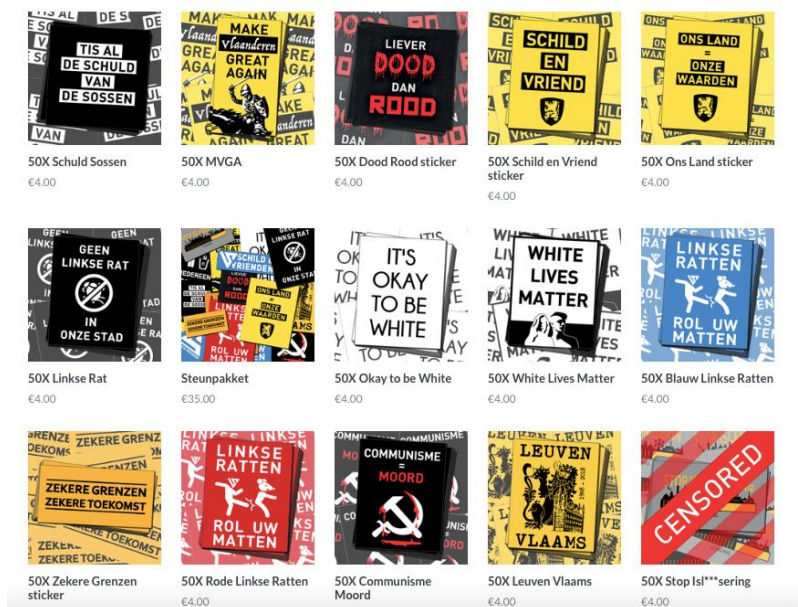


Figure 2: Stickers for sale in the Schild & Vrienden Webshop

Schild & Vrienden exists through combining and adapting stuff from different New Right movements and thus from different spatiotemporal frames. It is at this point that the concept of 'poiesis-infrastructure' is useful. The stickers are unique in their mixture, but the creativity and the uniqueness is not endless, it exists only in local adaptations of global products. The infrastructural conditions create norms, formats and (ideological) constraints. The 'creativity' of Schild & Vrienden is not only constrained by the accepted formats, repertoires and discourses within the local and global New Right, but also by affordances of the mainstream digital media.

The algorithmic preferences of the mainstream digital media co-construct activist formats. These algorithms are not passive, nor neutral: they have computational agency (Tufekci, 2015 & 2017). In order to use social media as a metapolitical instrument, one has to be able to drive traffic to one's account. Driving traffic means that one not only has to produce content that resonates with a certain audience, the content should also be formatted for uptake. For it is that audience, in interaction with the content and the algorithms of a particular medium that will allow uptake of messages. The affordances of these digital media impose normative conditions and constraints on what can happen. Digital media only distribute (englobalized) your message if you know how to prepare your content for uptake.

The semiotic and discursive material of Schild & Vrienden is thus the result of a complex dialogue with the different national and the truly global operating New Right cells and the mainstream algorithmic infrastructures of Facebook and YouTube. Their metapolitical activism can only be successful, if

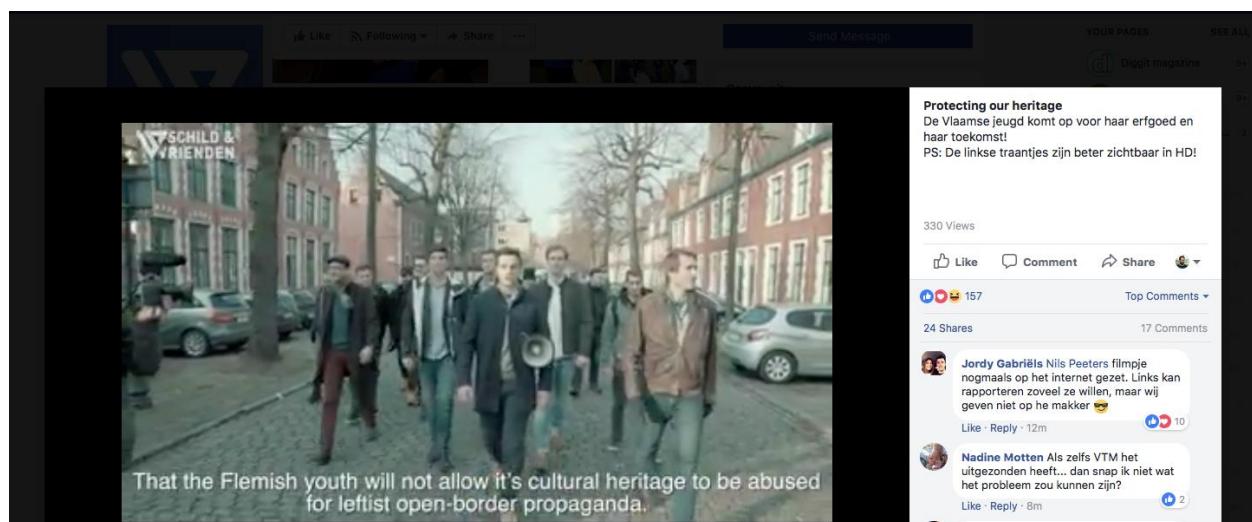
- (1) They succeed in the reworking of globalized resources to fit the local and the global New Right context,
- (2) They succeed in tweaking the algorithmic preferences in order to help them distribute their metapolitical content.
- (3) Mobilize their network to push content to virality

Let's now return to our central case and zoom in how Schild & Vrienden prepared their content for uptake and how this Global New Right network is visible in local activism. First I shall look revisit the video and analyze at the level of 'metapragmatics' (Jacobs, 1997). This metapragmatical approach focuses on the indicators of the producer's reflexive awareness of its audience and the communicative context. In other words, we can look at the producer's intended audiences, the preferred uptake of this clip (Blommaert & Maly, 2016) and their knowledge of the communicative context.

First fact is that the video fared quite well on Facebook. Facebook videos are a relatively new feature on Facebook, a feature Facebook launched to compete with YouTube. As a consequence, the digital platform pushes (short) videos on its platform. Secondly, videos on Facebook should have subtitles. As many people scroll through their newsfeed on their smartphone or computer in places where the sound of the video would be inappropriate, subtitles are a crucial feature to have 'reach' and 'engagement'. Thirdly, there should be immediate interaction with the post in terms of likes and comments but especially in terms of 'shares' (Maly & Beekman, 2018).

Failing to adhere to these format guidelines, means that the video will not ‘take off’ and thus fail in its metapolitical goals.

The activists of Schild & Vrienden clearly know the game. The video is relatively short (2 minutes 50 seconds), uses subtitles and was published 10 minutes before 10 o’clock in the morning, at a time when there is a peak of people on Facebook. The first people liking and commenting on the video, were largely members of Schild & Vrienden. They started tagging friends. The second category of people engaging with the post were militants of the extreme-right Flemish party Flemish interest. But very soon, in a matter of minutes, a much broader uptake was realized. In the first 15 minutes, the video generated 330 views, 157 interactions, 17 comments and 24 shares. After a half an hour, it generated 880 views, 221 interactions, 27 comments and 41 shares. The uptake of the clip was thus quite spectacular and as a result the Facebook algorithms further pushed the video.



This uptake was not limited to Flanders or to Flemish activists, it very fastly circulated on a global scale. This spread was not a coincidence, the clip, from the very start, was designed for global uptake. The first indication of this is found in the video’s English title ‘*Protecting our heritage*’ and in the English subtitles. The use of English, especially considering the importance of the Dutch Language within the Flemish nationalist tradition, is remarkable and informs us the message itself was from the start produced with an international audience in mind.

Communication is never generic, it is never intended for ‘all people’ around the world. Communication always addresses a specific type of people and excludes others. In this case, it is clear that they targeted the global New Right niche: the metapragmatical queues were perfectly managed. The video reproduces a discourse that is dominant within that niche. The enemy *par excellence* is framed as the ‘older generation’ of ‘multicultural’, ‘open border’ ‘leftists’. This generational populist frame resonates with the radical right, the identitarians and alt-right activists around the world.

Global numbers and local facts

When we now look at the uptake, we see that the producers ticked all the boxes: not only did the clip go viral two times in a row, it gathered a solid number of views (92k) and (2.2K) likes. If we zoom in on these likes, we see that around 1500 profiles ‘like’ the video, 536 ‘love’ the video, and around 100 profiles ‘cry’ or are ‘angry’ or ‘surprised’. Virality, and the likes, shares, comments and overall ‘Facebook reach’ is an important aspect of the populist discourse of Schild & Vrienden. Uptake and reach is framed as proof of their relevance and their recognition and support of ‘the people’, the youth.



In figure 4 we see a Tweet of Dries Van Langenhove, the president of Schild & Vrienden claiming that their Facebook community has a monthly reach of 250.000 a 500000 people. This is used as proof that ‘the other’ – the left - is living in a bubble. It is this quantitative dimension of ‘reach’ and views that is used to support the claim that Schild & Vrienden speaks ‘in name of the Flemish youth’. The 10.000 followers of the Schild & Vrienden Facebook community Page, the virality of their posts in mass media and the reporting on this social media reality in mainstream news (cfe Cools & Andries, 2018) construct an image of popularity. It also contributes to the idea that Schild & Vrienden should be reported on: if you like it or, not: they exist (De Ceulaer, 2018).

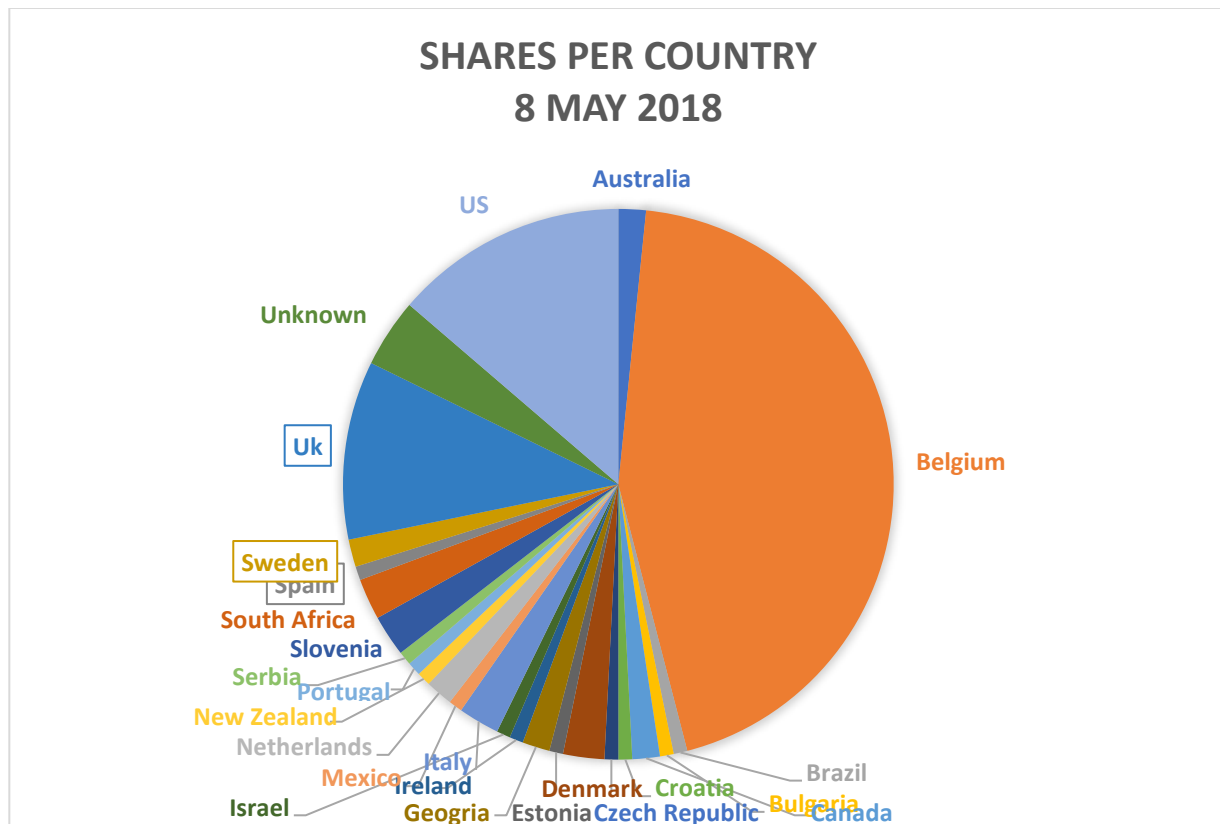
Numbers and virality are social facts. The activism of Schild & Vrienden becomes visible through the mediatization on social media. And this visibility is at least partially realized by mobilizing an audience to click, share and comment on these posts. It is at this point that the global network enters the equation. If we zoom in on the Facebook shares – the activity that generates the largest reach on Facebook (Maly & Beekmans, 2018) – we get to see just how ‘niched’ and ‘targetted’ but also how global their audience is. In total, he post generated 1.2K shares. The first day, 8 March 2018, it was shared 127 times (of which only one profile shared it to criticize them). This huge amount of shares could easily be mistaken for popularity among the Flemings, the Flemish youth or even amongst ‘concerned citizens’ approving the message and the offline intervention of Schild & Vrienden.

Such a superficial reading, in which the shares in themselves are read through a populist framework, only contributes to the metapolitical goal of these shares: it legitimates the populist claim that they speak in name of the Flemish youth. The shares, and the superficial reading of

shares as an instance of ‘networked individualism’ Castells (2015) fails in many ways. From the moment, one starts to give attention to the ‘details’ and start investigating the profiles that share the video, we see the ‘organized’ nature of this ‘popularity’. This is not a spontaneous movement that starts from a spark of outrage. These are not just ordinary citizens showing their support of this message by sharing. It is also not an act of ‘slacktivism’ or feel good activity as Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) would call it.

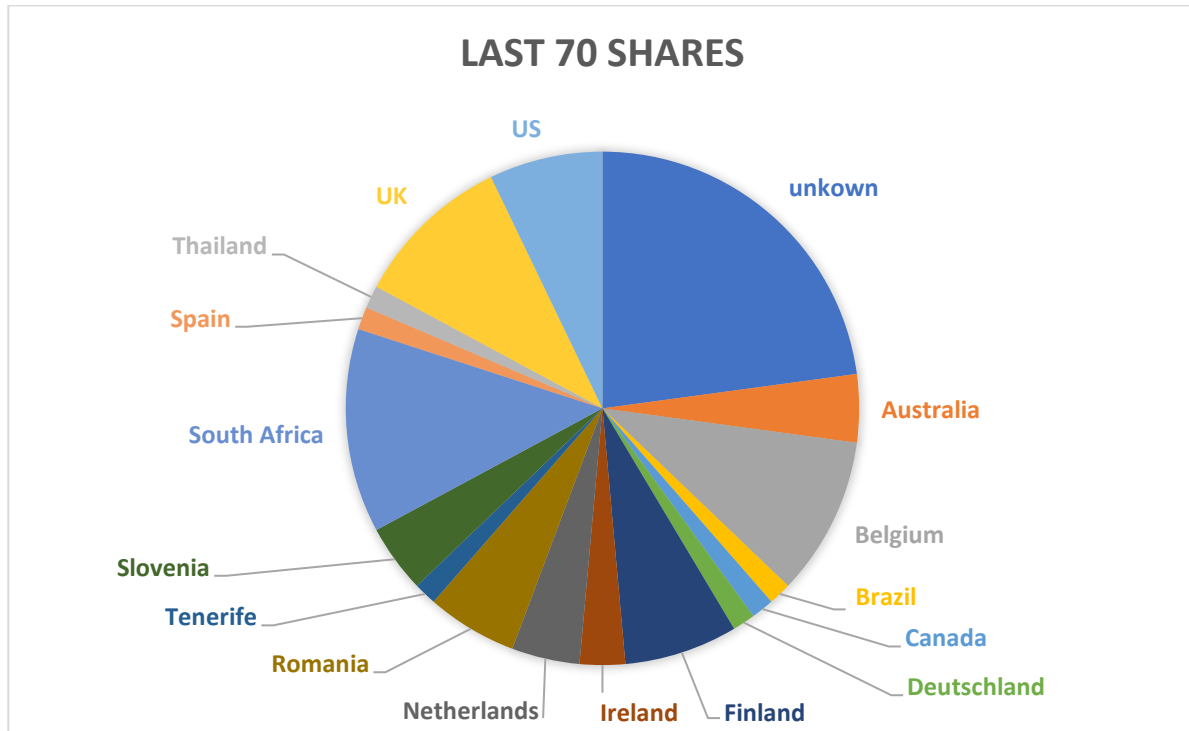
I would propose that these shares are best understood as metapolitical activism. It is part of a global cultural war (Nagle, 2017) embedded in a transnational New Right niche. It connects individuals, activists, organizations or cells from different places into one global New Right Network. This network operates on different scales, from the local to the truly global, from the individual to the organization. Even though, most individuals may not know each other, de facto, they are all part of one a hybrid global New Right nationalist activistic network.

Let us, to illustrate this claim, look in more detail at the profiles sharing the Facebook video from Schild & Vrienden. From the 123 profiles that share the post on that first day, only 55 indicate that they are from Belgium (4 profiles do not give a country of origin). 17 people claim to be from the United States of America, 13 people indicate that they live in the UK. Profiles from 24 different countries shared this post on the first day it was online.



If we look at the last 70 shares of the video, we see that the Belgian profiles are only good for 10% of the shares. South-Africa (9 shares), UK (7 shares) and 16 sharing profiles don't give a

‘home-base’. Especially these last 16 profiles are truly ‘global’ New Right activistic profiles: they only seem to share (New Right) content from all over the world.



Facebook and the anti-Enlightenment ideoscape.

This global New Right audience was not reached as an *accident du parcours*, it was addressed through the explicit use of English, and the message itself. If we scrutinize the different sharing profiles we encounter what we with Appadurai (1996: 36) could call an ‘ideoscape’: a global cultural flow consisting out of a string of images, often directly political and connected to the state or to the counter-movements trying to capture (a piece of) state power.

In the nineties, the master narrative in these ideoscapes was the Enlightenment narrative, with the now so familiar chain of terms, concepts and images like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’. The ideoscape under scrutiny here, has a very different master narrative. The master concept in this chain of concepts and ideas is without a doubt ‘the nation’ and it connects with familiar concepts as ‘our values’, ‘heritage’, ‘norms’, ‘our culture’, ‘borders’, ‘anti-migration’, ‘anti-left’, ‘anti-liberal’, ‘anti cultural marxism’ and ‘anti-globalism’. It is an anti-Enlightenment narrative (Sternhell, 2010) that questions the democratic Enlightenment discourse and its stress on equality, freedom, universal human right. These activists fight for a world order based on cultural difference, on borders and homogenic nations or entities, not for democracy and not for inalienable Universal Human Right.

Even though this ideoscape is characterized by a remarkable ideological coherence, it should be stressed that it still is a layered and polycentric landscape. For example, within this anti-Enlightenment ideoscape, the master-term ‘nation’ can be used in many different translations,

local political conceptualizations or integrated in different chains of concepts. Concretely. The nation can be used as an ethno-cultural construct or in its blood-and-soil conceptualization depending on the individual and his relation to the large socio-political and cultural context.

The conceptual chain in which concepts are used can also differ very much. If we for instance compare the Romanian profiles sharing the Schild & Vrienden video with the Belgian profiles, we see that in the Romanian profiles there is far more stress on Religion, traditional family values and homophobic content, whereas the Belgian profiles in general stress the ‘acceptance of LGBTQ+’ as part of ‘our tolerant culture’. These differences in the New Right or anti-Enlightenment ideoscape can be explained by looking at how they intersect with the local, national and transnational media- and ethnoscapas. Or put differently, how they interact with the infrastructures working on different scales.

The ideological consistency can on the other hand be explained by the existence of a global New Right mediascape. This infrastructural dimension of the New Right Network became very visible when I revisited all the sharing profiles of the Schild & Vrienden video on 30 May 2018. At that time, Tommy Robinson, the former head of the English Defence League and Pegida UK who is well networked with Martin Sellner of the Austrian chapter of Generation Identity, was sentenced to 13 months of imprisonment for contempt for the court. Robinson was arrested on Friday 22 May 2018 and pleaded guilty. In 5 hours he was arrested, sentenced and jailed. New Right activists around the world set up petitions and posted their outrage on social media. His arrest was framed as proof of the power of the liberal elite and the fact that truth had to be silenced. If we look at the profiles initially sharing the Schild & Vrienden post, we see that 51 of the 123 profiles also shared at least one post on Tommy Robinson between 28 and 30 May. And again, this was an example of the global dimension of this New Right activist network. Activists from 12 different countries posted memes, petitions and outrage in favor of Tommy Robinson.

The global New Right Network

The fast spread of digital media has given New Right activists around the world and especially in the West access to a vast right-wing media landscape. Not only the big names in the New Right bubble – such as Milo, Steve Bannon, Richard Spencer or Alain de Benoist but also the local activists now have access to these transnational space and cultural flows. Some of the infrastructures like Arktos, Red Ice and the Alt-Right crowd-funding platform work on a truly global scale. Others work on national and transnational scale, but they are all connected in that global New Right Network that aims to ‘make anti-globalism global’ (see figure 5).



Important to stress here is that, in the case of New Right activists, the offline and online, the local and the global are inherently connected. New Right movements all over the world set up headquarters, *Thinks Thanks*, magazines and even offline libraries (Salzborn, 2016). The offline meeting and network spaces like the Scandza Forum, the yearly conference of the National Policy Institute or American Renaissance establish strong ties. Or take for example, the Summer university that the French branch of the pan-European movement sets up on a yearly basis. *Generation Identitaire* organizes this training camp not only to train activists from different European Identitarian movements, but to also construct a network of strong ties among identitarian activists on a European scale. The leader of Schild & Vrienden Dries Van Langenhove was one of the participants of the Summer University of *Generation Identitaire* in 2015 (Personal communication, 2018). The fact that the format of the intervention of Schild & Vrienden at the Castle in Ghent follows the example of the mediatised activism of *Generation Identitaire* is thus not just copycat behavior through a digital network, it is also embedded in a larger network of cells working online and offline and operating on different scales.

It would thus be wrong to see the offline structures as different or more ‘real’ than the online manifestation of these organizations. All these offline infrastructures are connected partly through the internet and partly through offline networks. *Generation Identitaire* for instance, does not only set up Facebook (community) pages and websites, it also sets up different local club houses and boxing clubs. These offline spaces are used to manage and organize the troop but also to produce content for the online spaces. Offline protest is for example also used for online mobilization and a long-term metapolitical battle. Digital media enable the fast and transnational distribution of discourse, the upscaling of local activism and facilitate global communication and organization.

Key figures and platforms in that movement do not keep it a secret that they want to build a global nationalist movement. Alright.com has an explicit Western/global scope, aiming to bring together the best writers ‘*Alt-Right, in North America, Europe, and around the world.*’ (Alright.com/about, 2018) in order to be ‘*an essential organ in the international Alt-Right—a Breitbart for the age to come, not the one that has passed.*’ (Spencer, 2017a). This dream of

building an international New Right network is also visible in the connections between Generation Identity activists in Europe and Alt-Right figures and movements in the US. Martin Sellner, from the Identitarian Bewegung Austria and a key-figure in the pan-European organization of the identitarian movement, not only has contacts with the youth division of UKIP, he is also connected with Lauren Southern and dates Brittany Pettibone (an American Alt-Right vlogster). These three activists got to know each other during their visit to the Defend Europe mission of Generation Identitair. Since then all three of them are clearly operating on a global scale trying to make these blood-and soil nationalist movements part of an international movement fighting for a nationalist world order.

The same evolution is also visible on the highest political level. Farage the former leader and Face of UKIP is not only active on the European scale, he was invited several times to the US to support Trump during rally's. And just like Farage after Brexit, Bannon after Trump and Breitbart is operating on a global scale. In March 2018 Bannon started a European tour meeting extreme and far right politicians and activists and speaking at different rally's. He speeched about '*the future of international populist nationalism*' during an event set up by the conservative weekly magazine Weltwoche. During the speech he praised Christoph Blocher as the 'Trump before Trump' (Breitbart, 2018). He travelled to Germany to have a meeting with Alternative fur Deutschland, from where he went to Italy to support Michael Salvini from La Lega. From Italy, he travelled to France to speak at the Front National Congress fully supporting Marine Le Pen. And he plans to visit the extreme-right party Vlaams Belang in Belgium in 2018. Bannon is also very explicit about his goals, he sees himself as "*the infrastructure, globally, for the global populist movement*" (New York Times, 2018).

The New Right movements invest heavily in online and offline infrastructures that support the movement not only on a local or national scale, but also on pan-European and a global scale. The Global New Right Network thus does not merely exist out of networked individuals (Miller, 2011). The individuals/profiles are to a large extent embedded in different cells and infrastructures. If we for instance look at the Belgian profiles sharing the Schild & Vrienden post on the first day (and thus helping it going viral), we see that the majority of them also shares posts of and self-identifies with the extreme-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang (Flemish interest). This global network is thus not solemnly digital, in part it rests on classic local (offline) infrastructures like this (youth divisions) of political parties like Vlaams Belang and N-VA (New Flemish Alliance), but also the student-unions like KVHK and NSV from which Schild & Vrienden recruit most of their members.

Online, the pages of the leading politicians of Vlaams Belang also function as infrastructures around which cells of activists are formed. And of course, the Facebook community of Schild & Vrienden and their meme-community-page '*De Fiere Vlaamse meme*' are also infrastructures that facilitate the growing of cells. Even though these cells are mainly operating at a local level they are, through the affordances of social media like Facebook, globally connected. A lot of the Belgian profiles sharing and showing support for the #freetommy intervention, did this by sharing a post from Vlaams Belang president Tom Van Grieken or by sharing the post of Schild & Vrienden.



All these individuals, local and global cells together, operating on different scales, organize and structure the cultural flows within the global New Right ideoscape. They function as hubs that connect and mobilize local activists for global issues and global activists for local issues. The UK-pages like Identity Bloc England, Traditional Britain Group and Europe Defence League do not only support Tommy Robinson and typical ‘British’ messages, they were also amongst the most influential platforms sharing the Schild & Vrienden video.

It is remarkable to find that most of the reach of the Schild & Vrienden video is not realized by the sharing of local individuals, but through the sharing of the post by (non-Flemish) pages and communities. This is remarkable, because the Facebook algorithms favor ‘personal profiles’ (Arbel, 2018). Pages only generate 4% of the Newsfeed traffic. Nevertheless, we see, in the case of the first day of sharing, that 110 individual profiles sharing the video 115 times only managed to generate a measly 158 likes and 30 additional shares in total. 13 (community)-pages (most of them with no connection to Flanders or even Belgium), on the other hand, sharing it 13 times, generated a whopping 808 likes and 195 additional shares in that first day.

The pages and communities clearly function as important hubs that structure the global flows in the New Right niche, and organize and mobilize local cells for global activism. Many of these pages have a clear ‘local goal and audience’, but nevertheless support other radical New Right nationalist movements around the world by sharing their content.

The page that generated the most shares (75) and likes (108) for the Schild & Vrienden video was ‘Weekblad ‘t Pallieterke’. ‘t Pallieterke was founded in 1945 as a right-wing, Flemish nationalist weekly close to the extreme-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang. It is through their sharing, that several Vlaams Belang militants started sharing the video. And we see the same dynamic on a translocal scale where Facebook pages & communities engage local militants in sharing content. Pages like ‘Trump 2020’, Quotidian Conservative News and Red symposium were all set up in 2015, use a very similar design and duplicate content from each other. They were clearly set up to support Trump. Today they still function as supporting

platforms for Trump, but they also function as infrastructures of this global New Right activist network. And the same is true for pages like 'Boer: Aktueel' (47 likes and 28 shares), the Finnish Defence League (20 likes and 5 shares), White is beautiful (219 likes and 38 shares) or the Traditional Britain Group (208 likes and 70 shares) who trigger local activists to share the video.

Some of the Facebook pages, communities and even profiles are truly global. The profile of 'Alan Gerard' is interesting in this respect. The profile shared the Schild & Vrienden video a whopping 21 times. The profile does not mention a location, does not have a profile pic, but does manage to have more than 1300 friends. On 30 May alone, he shared more than 60 posts, all connected to New Right political movements and politicians around the world: ranging from pro-Tommy-posts, over post supporting Le Pen and promoting anti-migration. One of the most influential communities in generating likes (169) and shares (22) for the Schild & Vrienden video is called '*Triggering Memes for Regressive Teens II*'. This Facebook community of more than 29000 Facebook profiles is truly global, generating shares and likes for the Schild & Vrienden video by profiles from the UK, Canada, Romania, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Australia and the US.

This global New Right Network sharing and liking posts to support New Right movements and politicians has impact way outside their niche. It not only succeeded in triggering Flemish mainstream media to report on Schild & Vrienden, it succeeded in attracting worldwide attention. And the same thing happened with the pro-Tommy Robinson activism. The global spread of pro-Tommy messages on social media was also taken offline. In the Dutch parliament it was Wilders who raised the issue. As a result of these online and offline pressures, the mainstream press started reporting. This increases their following, the reach of their platforms and the uptake of their message.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the activism of Schild & Vrienden can only be fully grasped if we look at it as layered activism, bringing together practices, semiotic and discursive materials from very different origins and scales. Their local nationalistic activism has an important global dimension and the impact of their activism is, at least partially, generated by the upscaling of its activism. It is in this upscaling that a marginal movement on a local scale can organize virality online and create the idea that they are representing 'concerned citizens'.

Access and control over the higher scale is unevenly distributed and it has long been the privilege of the elites. Digitalization made upscaling attainable for more and more people, including for the New Right activists. All over the world, we see a rise of New Right movements and whenever we analyze them, we see a remarkable, ideological, strategic, discursive coherence and coherence in the repertoires of resistance. This coherence can only be partially explained by pointing at the historical ideological work of *La Nouvelle Droite*, more important is the impact of digitalization. It is at this point that the concept of 'poiesis-infrastructure' proved to be very useful. Local nationalistic activism is creatively produced in interaction with resources circulating through digital infrastructures and the affordances of mainstream digital media.

Digitalization has provided these nationalist movements with powerful tools to connect and collaborate with other activists around the globe. They effectively use the scale-advantages, network effects and the benefits of cellular structures to fight for the (re)construction of the old 19th century vertebrate system par excellence: the (blood and soil) nation. Such 'synchronization' is, as we know, a tactic of power (Blommaert, 2005: 136). The denial of the layered nature of this activism, its format and its discourse contributes to its discursive power. It is these power effects of synchronization that forces political scientists to not only bring in a focus on discourse, and thus of the history of that discourse, but also to move beyond methodological nationalism and focus on the embeddedness of these discourses in infrastructure and networks of cellular systems.

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